Moving Forward

The Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research

Strategic Planning Report

June 1992

92-07884/

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Thank You

"AHFMR has a history of success in supporting world-class medical research and now we have a clear vision of how we can become even more successful.

Our effectiveness depends very much on the cooperation and collaboration of many stakeholders and we are grateful to all those who participated in our strategic planning. They have expressed their confidence in us and in these challenging times, we are moving forward with commitment and imagination to fulfil the bright promise of medical research in this province."

Mr. Alvin Libin
Chairman, AHFMR

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What is the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research?

The Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research was established in 1979 by the Government of Alberta with an endowment of $300 million to support a balanced, long-term program of medical research based in Alberta. Operating with some of the interest on the endowment, the Foundation supports medical researchers at the Universities of Alberta, Calgary and Lethbridge and their affiliated institutions.

Since 1980, the Foundation has contributed over $370 million directly to the Alberta medical research community. The majority of these funds goes to personnel support for scientists recruited from Canada and around the world. Other funds support young researchers in training. A special clinical research program encourages physicians to engage in medical research. Another program supports the commercialization of medical innovations arising in universities or industry. Other grants provide equipment, visiting researchers, and conference support.

Heritage researchers engage in a broad spectrum of basic, patient and health research in fields such as genetics, biochemistry, immunology, neuroscience, cardiology, and infectious diseases.

The Foundation is governed by a board of trustees and headed by a president who is the CEO. They are advised by an international Scientific Advisory Council, other advisory groups, and for the allocation of awards, by peer review committees of researchers. All of the research is carried out in the universities and affiliated institutions, with the exception of some technology commercialization activities in industry.

Why Strategic Planning?

AHFMR has made impressive progress in meeting goals since it was established in 1979. The Foundation has funded a strong community of medical researchers, many of them gaining international recognition for their discoveries. The millions of dollars they attract from other funding agencies in Alberta, Canada and the U.S. also attest to the quality of their work. The patient clinics established and the clinical research program are a good start to advancing patient care. Over 3000 young people have received research training with Foundation funds. The thriving technology commercialization program fosters the diversification of Alberta's economy. All the Foundation programs were strongly endorsed by the first International Board of Review in 1986.

After 12 years of operation, it is time to re-examine AHFMR goals and activities in the context of current issues in the medical research community and the health care scene, the changing economy, and the maturity of the Foundation. Some of these issues are outlined below.

The Foundation has funded a very broad range of medical research encompassing many disciplines. Is it time to focus on strengths that have been developed or new opportunities arising from discoveries in specific fields? How can the Foundation play a greater role in addressing urgent health care issues arising from specific, widespread health problems and from escalating costs? Given that research costs have inflated greatly since the Foundation's inception and that the endowment has not been supplemented, the Foundation cannot fund all existing programs at the desired level and also mount new ones. What are the budget priorities? How can Foundation funding most effectively complement activity by other funding agencies? What about the researchers' need for career stability?

To address these challenging issues and create direction for the Foundation in the next five years, the trustees and management executed a strategic planning process from October 1991 to June 1992.

The Process of Planning

Initially, the Trustees and the President held several strategic planning meetings to identify the critical issues to be addressed and the most appropriate process. Consulting firms were contacted. However, it was decided that the process would be trustee/management supervised with the assistance of a professional facilitator, Linda Tarrant of TOC Consulting.

Consulting the Stakeholders

The process was carefully designed to hear the ideas and concerns of a broad group of stakeholders in medical research in Alberta and to foster genuine debate about issues. To accomplish this, the Foundation invited people to participate in focus groups for half a day to discuss six questions. Trustees and management attended.

The focus groups were:

Group 1. Scientific Community: This included representatives from the Faculties of Medicine, Nursing, and Science from the University of Calgary, the University of Lethbridge, and Red Deer College.

Group 2. University Administration: This included vice-presidents, deans and associate deans in the Faculties of Science, Medicine, Nursing, Dentistry, Social Sciences, Physical Education, and Medical Physiology, and representatives of the research offices from the Universities of Alberta and Calgary.

Group 3. Scientific Community: This included representatives from the Faculties of Science, Medicine, Nursing, Rehabilitation Medicine, Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, and Arts at the University of Alberta and from nursing at Athabasca University.

Group 4. Hospital Administration: This included presidents and chairmen from the U of A Hospitals, the Foothills Hospital and the Alberta Cancer Board.

Group 5. Health-related Organizations: This included representatives from the Alberta Association of Registered Nurses, the Alberta Cancer Society, the Alberta Centre for Well-Being, the Alberta Foundation for Nursing Research, the Alberta Health Care Association, the Alberta Heart and Stroke Foundation, the Alberta Medical Association, the Council of Teaching Hospitals, the Health Units Association of Alberta, and the Science Alberta Foundation.

Group 6. Deputy Ministers: This included the Deputy Minister of Advanced Education, the Deputy Provincial Treasurer, the Deputy Minister of

Technology, Research and Telecommunications and a representative from Alberta Health.

Group 7. Scientific Advisory Council: The 11 members of the Scientific Advisory Council of the Foundation served as a strategic planning focus group. Members are distinguished researchers from Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom.

Group 8. Program Advisory Committee: The Foundation's Program Advisory Committee served as a focus group. The ten members are representatives of the medical research communities at the Universities of Alberta and Calgary.

The participation of the focus groups was most gratifying because it was enthusiastic, concerned and honest, with agreement on several key points and very diverse opinions on others. The discussions were summarized in detail and all of the input was considered by the trustees in their deliberations.

Other Research Agencies

As part of strategic planning, other medical research-funding agencies were consulted. AHFMR Chairman, Mr. Alvin Libin, and the President, Dr. Matthew Spence, and two trustees, Dr. Paul Davenport, President of the University of Alberta, and Prof. Murray Fraser, President of the University of Calgary, visited the presidents or directors of: the Medical Research Council, the National Cancer Institute and the Fonds de la Recherche en Santé du Québec. Dr. Spence and Mr. Libin visited the Howard Hughes Medical Institute in Maryland, and the USA National Institutes of Health in Maryland. Dr. Spence also visited two British agencies, the Wellcome Trust and the Research Directorate of the National Health Service.

These visits were fruitful, particularly as most of the agencies were also strategic planning and grappling with similar issues.

After studying the input from the focus groups and agencies, the trustees and management formulated the mission statement, principles, and the goals. Management is translating the goals into operational objectives and actions to achieve them. The mission, principles, and goals are now being used in decision-making and in evaluating activities.

A Continual Process

Strategic planning is a continual activity, as reflected in the ninth goal. The 1992 process reported here has given the Foundation an effective direction for the next five years, but continual evaluation has been built into all the award programs and activities. Consulting with the scientific community and others working for the health of Albertans is also ongoing because advancements occur only when all the players come together.

Discussion Questions for Focus Groups

1. What are some of the most critical biomedical and health research opportunities for the future?

2. The Foundation concentrates over 85% of its support in basic biomedical research.

   a) Should the Foundation modify priorities and programs to support more patient-based medical research and health research (including health care delivery, cost-effectiveness, health promotion, etc.)?

   b) What should be the mix of research activities for the future?

3. Should the Foundation focus funding in a few specific areas or fund individual excellence without regard to field or specific area of research?

4. Consider the strengths, concerns and challenges facing the following groups that interact with the Foundation. How might they affect the future planning of the Foundation?

   a) Scientific community
   b) Universities and major teaching hospitals
   c) Governments
   d) Other research granting agencies
   e) Other provincial organizations and institutions
   f) Public

5. How can inter-institutional collaboration in the development and maintenance of biomedical and health research be encouraged?

6. The Foundation's funding is broadly grouped in four programs:

   Personnel support for investigators – scholars and scientists (over 50% of budget); research support & infrastructure programs (18%); training programs (17%); technology commercialization (6%).

   a) Should the mix of these programs supported by the Foundation change?
   b) If so, how?

AHFMR Principles

The AHFMR operates according to the following principles.

- ❑ Medical research based on international standards of excellence leads to improved health.
- ❑ Responsible stewardship of financial resources is necessary to ensure the continuance of the AHFMR for future generations.
- ❑ AHFMR holds a public trust and is accountable to the people of Alberta.
- ❑ Effective support of medical research requires collaboration among research institutions, granting agencies, governments and the private sector.
- ❑ Researchers require a supportive environment to achieve excellence in a highly competitive world of research.
- ❑ AHFMR requires autonomy and independence to be effective.

Terms

The terms "medical research", "basic research", "patient-based research" and "health research" as used throughout this document require definition. In this report, the following definitions apply.

Medical research is the search for new knowledge about the maintenance of health and the prevention and treatment of disease through the generation and testing of hypotheses. In this document, it is used as a global term, encompassing the continuum from basic fundamental laboratory-based research on molecules and biological systems, through patient and population-based health research, and includes research sometimes referred to as basic, applied, patient-based, clinical or health research.

Basic research is concerned with fundamental biological questions relating to basic functions and mechanisms in such disciplines as anatomy, biochemistry, chemistry, mathematics, pathology, pharmacology and physics.

Patient-based or clinical research is research on the maintenance of health and the mechanisms and treatment of disease in humans.

Health research is generating and testing hypotheses related to the promotion of health and the prevention of disease in the community. It includes research on the organization and delivery of health care, technology assessment, community health, health promotion and disease prevention.

AHFMR Mission Statement

We support a community of researchers who generate knowledge that improves the health and quality of life of Albertans and people throughout the world.

Our long-term commitment is to fund basic, patient and health research based on international standards of excellence and carried out by new and established investigators and researchers in training.

AHFMR Goals

AHFMR activities are directed toward the following goals:

1. To maintain international standards of excellence through an appropriate and effective peer review system.

2. To manage expenditures to ensure the continuance of AHFMR for future generations while avoiding significant fluctuations in annual spending.

3. To maintain and strengthen basic research in order to discover the underlying causes of disease and provide a foundation for patient and health research, the practise of medicine and prevention of disease.

4. To expand AHFMR support of patient-based and health research in Alberta and lead new initiatives in these areas.

5. To maintain research education and training programs and encourage young Albertans to pursue research careers.

6. To encourage increased collaboration in Alberta, Canada and elsewhere among investigators, research institutions, governments, other granting agencies and the private sector.

7. To continue to promote the development of medical research-related economic activities in Alberta, including commercialization of innovation.

8. To maintain and improve communication with the public, government, the research community, universities, and health-related institutions.

9. To develop a mechanism for the continuing review and updating of the AHFMR strategic plan and for setting priorities.

Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research Act

(Government of the Province of Alberta, Chapter A-26, Revised Statutes of Alberta, 1980, Section 3)

The objects of the Foundation are to establish and support a balanced long-term program of medical research based in Alberta directed to the discovery of new knowledge and the application of that knowledge to improve health and the quality of health services in Alberta, and, without limiting the generality of those objects, to

a) stimulate research in medical sciences,

b) implement effective means of using in Alberta the scientific resources available in medical sciences,

c) support medical research laboratories and related facilities in Alberta,

d) promote co-operation in research in medical sciences in order to minimize duplication in, and promote concentration of, effort in that research, and

e) encourage young Albertans to pursue careers in research in medical sciences.